

September 7, 2014  
The Rev. John Forman  
Matthew 18:15-20

The peace of Christ is flowing constantly, but in community the peace of Christ is more than a steady state. Consenting for Christ to become the atmosphere in which we live with each other, the air that we breathe, involves on-going efforts to balance living relationships. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said it this way: “Our peace is what it is because it is a flow of unbroken activity, the constant maintenance of relation and growth as we give into each other’s lives and receive from each other, so that we advance in trust and confidence with one another and God.<sup>1</sup>”

In the Creed that we will pray together shortly we say that we “believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” For some people, that statement feels just a wee bit off the mark because most of us don’t really believe *in* the Church—certainly, not in the same way that we mean when we say that we believe in God or in Christ or in the Holy Spirit. As Archbishop Williams said it, the Church is not another reality on the same level as the Father, the Son, the Spirit. Awareness of that difference is actually reflected in the original Greek of the Nicene Creed that says literally, “we believe the Church.” Being good Episcopalians, of course, many of us sit up straight, preparing to qualify a phrase like that—“we believe the Church”—but I hope you’ll grant me this much: the Church is, or is intended to be, a community that we trust.

Part of the reason that I am standing in front of you today as your priest-in-charge is that, in addition to trusting God, a sufficient number of you trusted the processes of the church, trusted the Bishop’s office, trusted the vestry and trusted me so that you and the larger church community were willing to place me here with you for a while. In the weeks ahead, I will be working to earn the trust of you as individuals and as a community. And we will need to engage in active peace-making and relationship-building *together*, always in the knowledge that Christ is always among us.

Building and maintaining trustworthy community is Matthew’s deep concern in our Gospel this morning. And while most of us would agree that we would like that as well, there’s a difficulty. Communities, at least the ones that we are talking about, consist of people and people, maybe especially Church people, are complex. Sometimes our complexity can even weave our best intentions with our weaknesses. In C.S. Lewis’ book, “The Screwtape Letters,” senior demon Screwtape writes to his nephew, Wormwood. In one letter about *unselfishness* Screwtape offers an example of the sort of person “who lives for others—you can tell the others by their hunted expression.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, “Tokens of Trust”

Screwtape could write letters about any of us, of course, because we can all be generous and petty by turns; we can all be open-hearted and closed-minded in the same day, maybe even with the same people. In one moment, we can be remarkably supportive and in the next surprisingly indifferent. The complexity of human nature is the reality that Matthew's Jesus is speaking to with compassionate frankness and ingenuity.

Now, it would be easy to hear Jesus' words as a set of instructions for dealing with an offender—a misbehaving problem in need of correction. In fact, in an effort to be helpful, some bibles add a title to this reading: "On Reproving Another Who Sins." That title reinforces an approach to dealing with interpersonal conflict that feels very familiar to us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, where we esteem self-reliance, individualism and independence. We can hear it as guidelines for church discipline in an escalating sequence that ends in taking someone out of community. There is definitely a time and a place for that kind of discipline, and you will never hear me advocating that anyone of us simply become doormats for abusive people. But that's not what Jesus is talking about in this passage.

To hear what Jesus is actually laying out, we first have to recall the two passages on either side of this morning's Gospel. Just before our reading, Jesus has given the disciples the Parable of the Lost Sheep to think about. Two essential points from that parable are foundational for our reading this morning: First point—*no one* is expendable to God; no one is extra or unnecessary. Second point—*God* is the shepherd, not us, because *only God* has the capacity to tend—to *fully tend*—to both the 99 and the one. Jesus is giving us guidelines, but not for punishing the one. They are guidelines for reconciling the one with the 99.

Next week, we'll hear the passage that follows today's reading in which Jesus will point out that there are no limits to God's forgiveness and communal healing. There is no boundary beyond that can contain God's love. God's capacity to forgive far exceeds our own. In fact, the theme at the heart of Matthew's entire 18<sup>th</sup> chapter is forgiveness: how important forgiveness and reconciliation is to God, how important they are to the church body, and about how hard these both can be to actually extend and receive.

But even without those two bookend passages, there is a powerful clue right at the center of our reading. The path to reconciliation starts with a generally good strategy of starting the process privately and in person, and then, if needed, bringing in others to assure integrity to that process. After all, if a church is not a place of forgiveness, grace and mercy, then it's just a dysfunctional club. Godly love compels

Christians to address the inevitable conflicts that will arise and to *favor* forgiveness over separation. Talking *to*, rather than *about*, each other is a good and reasonable start.

What Matthew's Jesus offers next, however, is counter-intuitive and counterculture, and so requires us to listen carefully. In laying out the third step of his redemptive vision for the community, Jesus says: "...if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector." Now, remember that Matthew is himself a former tax collector and he is often concerned about the faithfulness of the emerging Christian community and its mission extended from Jews to Gentiles and beyond. So what does Jesus mean by "let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector"?

Well, despite my best efforts, and I'm sure to the horror of my Jesuit professors, I find myself in agreement with Eugene Peterson's Protestant-biased and idiomatic translation of scripture called "The Message." I find most of Peterson's translation inaccurate and indefensible. By contrast, the translation we heard this morning is quite faithful to the Greek. But Peterson's reworking of the passage actually helps to make Jesus' vision for community explicit without denying the presence of sin or papering over our inevitable differences. Peterson's version reads like this: "If [the sinning fellow believer] still won't listen, tell the church. If he [or she] won't listen to the church, *you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him [or her] with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.*"

That is to say, what Jesus offers is the invitation to consider each other, even in our offenses, as whole people—whole people whose choices might be based on some principle or belief that we don't share. Rather than seeking to correct *everyone* who offend us as wrong-doers, *sometimes*, we all do well to turn Christ-ward in search of learning. Sometimes, when a Christian brother or sister has upset us, the path forward is for both of us to look to Christ—to repent.

You see, Jesus is hoping to direct our focus toward reconciliation and away from punishment as our default. Notice what is ours to do when we are the 99 sheep, especially when the God who loves us all seeks to reunite a lost sheep with the rest. The peace of Christ in community relies on our active pursuit of the unity already given by grace. Peace based on God's love, not exclusion based on someone else's sin.

For the rest of the text, I must part ways with Eugene Peterson, which I'm sure will relieve many of my seminary professors. For centuries, the church has taken the next verse: "...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.." to refer specifically

to the sacramental rite of confession and reconciliation. That implication fits well with my own theology and I encourage all Episcopalians to consider an occasional private confession. If you do come to me for confession, I will ask you in all seriousness if you are prepared to live without the sin, because I trust in the effectiveness of the ritual.

But now think about the further implications: if you hold on to one of your own sins, it is retained until you reconcile with the body of Christ. That also implies that if you choose to hold on to—to bind yourself to—the pain or the wrong or the slight that someone else has done to you, that pain or wrong is held in your heart until you choose to or are able to release it. Sometimes, depending on the depth of the wounding, all we can pray is “Holy One, help me to want to forgive.”

Sometimes that’s about as much as the 99 as a community can muster when God is working to bring one of us back into the fold: “Holy One, help us to want to forgive.” The original Greek helps me with this tremendously, because instead of the rather gentle “...whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” the Greek is substantially stronger: “...whatever you *abolish* on earth will be *abolished* in heaven.” Sounds fantastic if I am thinking about sins and wrongs I am responsible for. But when I consider other people, do I really want even the most horrid person I can imagine to be *abolished* in heaven? Surely, if God can forgive even the most stubbornly sinful people, am I not compelled to at least look for ways to reconcile with my brothers and sisters, even if that means we must establish some healthy boundaries? Better for my own soul I think to at least pray, “Holy One, help me to want to forgive.”

In the back of the Book of Common Prayer, you will find this statement: “The mission of the Church is to *restore* all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” Forgiveness is at the core of our identity as Episcopalians, as a Christian community—as a local incarnation of the body of Christ with Jesus Christ as the head. St. Elizabeth (and every church for that matter) is meant to be a place where Jesus Christ and the love of God are visibly active. The steps that Jesus lays out for restoration and reconciliation may be the first steps for us all to move into a more peaceable and just world.

We will gather shortly at this table to take in the real presence of the Risen Christ, who is here among us. When you return to your pew, I invite you to sit in silence for a moment and look around this room with awe and amazement at who else is here, gathered in Christ’s name. There are people around you that you know and some you may love deeply, some you do not know, maybe one or two that you don’t like a lot, and maybe even someone who worries or frightens you a little. But you and each of them

are God's honored guests, praying Christ's prayer, living from Christ's life. Just for this timeless moment, each one of us and all those around us are touched with the glory of the end of days. Here, too, are God's creations—things of the world, God's natural gifts—transformed into effective signs of God's reconciling and renewing love. If only for a timeless moment, all of these things and all of us are what God intends us to be—signs of God's overflowing love.